

The Ritual of Fasting in the Old and New Testaments



Thrust Statement: Fasting is always a mark of deep spiritual concern.

Scripture Reading: [Matthew 6:6-18](#)

As one reflects upon the subject of fasting in the Old and New Testaments, one quickly discovers that fasting is a justifiable reaction to hazards, to hardships, to sadness, to mourning, or to confession of sin. Thus, many Christians resort to private fasting in the time of some physical or spiritual need in their own world of inadequacy. In order to shed light upon the practice of fasting in the Old and New Testaments, this essay will examine various texts to help determine the motives behind the numerous cases of fasting found in both Testaments.

FASTING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew verb, *xWm* (“to fast”), and the Hebrew noun, *som* (“a fast”), implies total abstinence from all food for a certain period. Also associated with these two words is another phrase, *u!nn> n#p#v* (“to afflict the soul”), which also conveys the idea of fasting. This latter phrase is found in [Leviticus 16:29](#), an expression associated with the Day of Atonement. Fasting in the Old Testament expresses grief and penitence. For example, the people of Jabesh Gilead, upon hearing of Saul’s mistreatment by the Philistines, took the bodies of Saul and his sons from Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned their bodies. Following their burial, the Scriptures inform its readers that the people fasted for seven days ([1 Samuel 31:11-13](#)). An example of penitence associated with fasting is found in [1 Samuel 7:6](#): “When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, ‘We have sinned against the LORD.’ And Samuel was leader of Israel at Mizpah” (NIV).

Prior to the Babylonian captivity, Isaiah (839 BCE), rebukes the children of Israel for thinking that fasting would automatically gain a hearing from God ([Isaiah 58:3-4](#)). Immediately, the prophet calls attention to right conduct. If one does not have respectable

behavior, then fasting is in vain (**58:5-12**). Fasting, in and of itself, is desirable under certain circumstances, but, on the other hand, one's life must exhibit the ethical character that pleases God and helps humanity. God speaks through Isaiah: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and to break every yoke: Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood (**58:6-7**).

As stated above, fasting is acceptable, but good behavior must precede fasting in order for this act of devotion to be acceptable to God (see also **Amos 5:21-24**). Following the Babylonian captivity, Ezra, a priest and teacher of the Law of God, assembles the people willing to go back to Jerusalem by the canal that flows toward Ahava. Whereupon he says, "I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions" (**Ezra 8:21**). One can find a number of examples in the Old Testament in which fasting was directed toward God to secure His guidance and help (see **Exodus 34:28**; **Deuteronomy 9:9**; **2 Samuel 12:16-23**; **2 Chronicles 20:3-4**).

FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The usual Greek words in the New Testament for fasting are the verb *nhsteuw* ("to fast, to go without food") and the noun *nhsteia* ("a fasting, a fast"). Fasting had become a common practice among the Jews and was continued among the Christians. The Jews fasted twice a week—Monday and Thursday—as a part of their religious devotion (see also **Luke 18:12**). Yet there were others like Anna who fasted often (**Luke 2:37**). The only occasion of Jesus fasting is in His temptation in the wilderness (**Matthew 4:1-4**). Jesus rebukes the practice of fasting when it is carried out simply as an outward manifestation of parade and not as inward act of devotion to God (**6:16-18**). The context of **Matthew 6:16-18** appears to assume that His disciples would find occasions that would call forth a time of abstinence from food in order to put themselves into a spiritual frame of mind to seek God's direction.

One such example of fasting is in the church at Antioch. Luke informs Theophilus (**Acts 1:1**) that while the church was engaged in "ministering" and "fasting" (**13:2**), the Holy Spirit says, "'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'"³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (**13:2-3**). This combination was common among the Jews, but the New Testament seldom combines these two acts of religious zeal. There are only four instances in the New Testament in which the two acts of devotion occur together. Two of the occurrences are found in connection with Anna (**Luke 2:37**) and Saul's conversion (**Acts 9:9-12**).

Fasting is not an essential ingredient for prayer, even though it is joined to prayer. Prayer is commanded in the New Testament, but fasting is not commanded. Just a perusal of the Book of Acts reveals the absence of fasting in many prayers. For instance, Luke records a prayer meeting following the release of Peter and John from prison (**4:23-31**). Yet, the absence of fasting is conspicuously not present. Another example is the selecting of seven deacons to carry on the "daily distribution of food" to Grecian Jews (**6:1**) in which the apostles says, "We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our

attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (6:3-4). Again, fasting is not included. There is no record of fasting in the appointment of Matthias as an apostle (1:24-26).

Fasting is noticeably missing from the New Testament Epistles. Even though the noun form is found in **2 Corinthians 6:5** and **11:27**, one detects that in neither context is the noun used in the sense of a religious fast. One can draw the conclusion that fasting was not extremely major during the apostolic period. Following the apostolic era, one discovers that fasting gained a foothold in the practices of the church. The church eventually mandated the practice of fasting two days a week—changing the days from Mondays and Thursdays to Wednesdays and Fridays. Martin Luther (1483—1547) did not object to fasting, but he did protest the binding of this act of religious observance as a necessary duty; he also raised objections to the fixing of certain days as compulsory for its performance. Excessive emphasis upon fasting is, perhaps, the reason the word *fasting* is added to the following Scriptures: **Matthew 17:21**; **Mark 9:29**; and **Acts 10:30**. Both liberal and conservative scholars agree that since Tischendorf (1815-1874) that the word *fasting* is textual additions to the original Greek text, which clearly indicates the church’s growing interest in the practice of fasting after the apostolic period.

CONCLUSION

An in-depth study of fasting in the Old Testament reveals that individuals resorted to fasting in order to avert calamity or to elicit God’s compassion. The prophets also reveal that fasting without true meekness and contrition is worthless in God’s sight. In the New Testament, one learns that the absence of Jesus from His disciples would lead one to believe that in the times of misfortune and misery, one would fast (see **Matthew 9:14-15**). Thus, one can conclude that fasting is a legitimate response to hazards, to hardships, to sadness, to mourning, or to confession of sin. These emotions may be demonstrated by private fasting. Having said this, nevertheless, fasting does not appear to be required of Christians. It is a voluntary act on the part of every believer when he/she realizes his/her inadequacy.